

Abuse of Power During CAFTA Debate- July 27, 2005

Rep. Slaughter Warns of Abuse of Power During CAFTA Debate

Rule for H.R. 3045, Dominican Republic-Central America-United States

Free Trade Agreement Implementation Act

July 27, 2005

Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding me this time.

Mr. Speaker, I am deeply concerned that as this discussion on CAFTA moves forward that the majority will, once again, succumb to the temptation to twist, bend, and break off the rules of debate and consideration in order to meet their objectives, just as they did during the Medicare debate of the 108th Congress.

During that debate the vote on final passage was held open for a shameful 3 hours while the Republican leadership twisted arms and cut deals to make up their vote deficit. The events of that night constituted one of the worst abuses of power I have witnessed in my almost 20 years in this House.

In the aftermath, allegations of bribery were leveled by a Republican Congressman, and an Ethics Committee investigation followed closely behind, one that ended in the admonishment of the majority leader of this House.

It is no secret that, just like last time, the Republican leadership is desperately scrambling to find the votes necessary to pass this bill, which I and many of my colleagues strongly oppose. But I would warn my friends in the majority that we dare not see a return to those underhanded tactics used by the leadership during the 108th Congress. There should be no votes held open for 3 hours. There should be no unethical arm-twisting on this House floor. The American people are watching this time.

Sadly, though, we are already seeing evidence that this pattern of abuse will once again carry the day. Last night in the Committee on Rules, we were given a paltry 1 hour's notice by the Republicans that we would be considering the most controversial trade agreement this body has contemplated since NAFTA. And of the three contentious bills that we considered in the Committee on Rules, not a single amendment was allowed, nor even a single substitute. It was a shut-out of democracy. And coming from a country trying to export democracy to the rest of the world, it showed us on our side of the Committee on Rules that we do not have it right yet.

Even though the House rules clearly state that 20 hours of debate is appropriate for a trade agreement, we offered to accept only 8 hours as a compromise, but that was too much democracy for this leadership. For the most contested trade agreement this body has considered in 12 years, we will have a whopping 2 hours of debate, less time than it would take you to watch ``Saving Private Ryan" on a DVD.

We were actually given more time to debate the renaming of five post offices Monday. Most high school debate teams spend more time considering the serious issues that face our country than we do here in the House.

But CAFTA clearly warrants our full and undivided attention. This is a major piece of legislation that will affect the lives of every American. CAFTA threatens to export even more American jobs and encourages American companies to relocate their factories in other countries. It does not provide adequate protection for workers, it turns back the clock on labor standards, and it does not provide any safeguards for improving environmental standards.

We need trade agreements that expand our access to the new markets and raise the standard of living for American families. This legislation falls far short on each of those standards.

As the arbiters of the rules of this hallowed institution, the Committee on Rules has a special responsibility to ensure that the integrity of the democratic process is preserved. That is why last night I asked the Republicans on the Committee on Rules for their assurance that we will not again see the egregious abuses of power and the trampling of the democratic process that we experienced in the last Congress on the Medicare debate, because we should be having 8 hours of debate and a 15-minute vote, not the other way around. Their reply was that ``rules would be followed," but they must not have meant the Rules of the House of Representatives when they made that promise, because what actually followed was a shut-down of any consideration of amendments to the medical malpractice bill, the prevention of any up-or-down votes on amendments to the China Trade Act, and the restriction of debate in consideration of CAFTA.

For the sake of the millions of American families depending on this Congress to spend the time and get it right on legislation, and especially on CAFTA, I hope that this time the debate lasts longer than the vote.